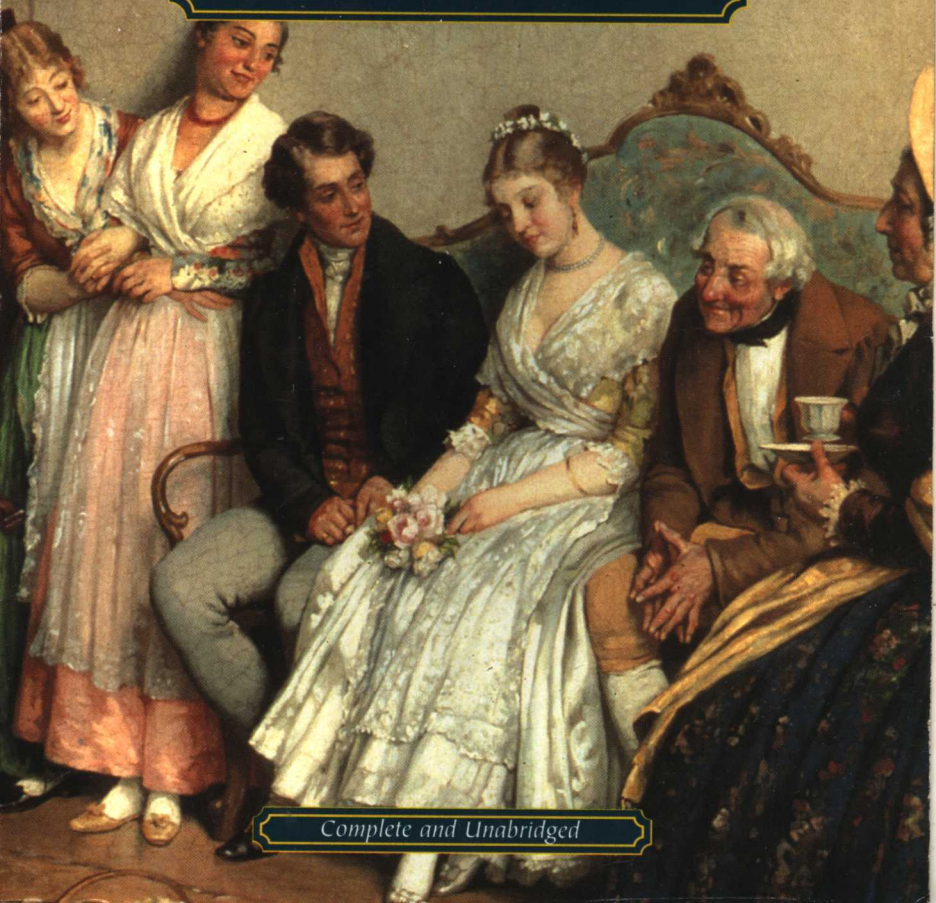


WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

CHARLES
DICKENS

*David
Copperfield*



Complete and Unabridged

DAVID COPPERFIELD

Charles Dickens

Introduction and Notes by

ADRIENNE E. GAVIN

Canterbury Christ Church University College



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write broad-ranging, jargon-free Introductions and to provide Notes that would assist the understanding of our readers, rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

KEITH CARABINE
General Advisor

INTRODUCTION

Reading or hearing the words 'David Copperfield' today conjures up three different images of what those words denote. They might refer to the title of Charles Dickens's novel, they might signify the eponymous protagonist of that novel, or they might designate our own contemporary, the magician David Copperfield. Dickens enjoyed popular entertainments such as conjuring and the circus and later in his own career gave public readings which held audiences spellbound by his own word-based form of stage 'magic,' but these three possible referents – novel, character and magician – have added parallels. All are involved in acts of transformation and with making those who watch or read suspend disbelief and enter into the illusions they create. David Copperfield the magician through sleight-of-hand creates grand illusions: he makes the Statue of Liberty disappear, he walks through the Great Wall of China. Dickens as author through sleight of word transforms his own personal experience and imagination into the grand illusion that is a novel. His character, David Copperfield, is himself transformed by the experiences of his fictional life as he

matures, and in turn, as narrator and writer, creates his own autobiographical illusion from the memories and echoes of that life. *David Copperfield* is a novel about transformations and illusions, not merely those created by language and memory, but also, centrally, those pertaining to human relationships.

Peter Penzoldt, writing of book titles in general, notes: '... if we see *David Copperfield* on the cover of our book we expect the story of a boy or a man, but beyond that everything must remain a surprise'.¹ The surprise is created from the tricks that the magician author and illusionist narrator perform through writing and lighting. In *David Copperfield* the spotlight falls on the emotional ties that bind characters to one another: ties of love, marriage, family, friendship, class, finance, dependency or geography; ties that range across sex, class and age. The transformational powers of human relationships and the shattering or sustaining of illusions about human behaviour link together what David the narrator calls the 'thread[s] in the web I have spun' (p. 697). The central thread is of course David Copperfield's life story and the key relationships are those in which he figures. His narrative reveals changes in himself, both internal and external, as he relates his history from the hours before his birth to a period when he is mature, happy, and a famous author; a time perhaps at which his transformation pauses and he can recognise the past illusions created by his 'undisciplined heart' and can put them aside in favour of his new magic, the power of words. In writing his autobiography, he reveals alterations not only in himself but in those people important, positively or negatively, in his life, and he implicitly grapples throughout with the question he poses in the first sentence of the novel but never explicitly answers: 'Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show' (p. 5).

David certainly appears to be the novel's hero in its opening section. John Forster, Dickens's friend and biographer, notes that David Copperfield's comment about himself: "If it should appear . . . that I was a child of close observation, or that as a man I have a strong memory of my childhood, I undoubtedly lay claim to both of these characteristics," was also 'unaffectedly true of Charles Dickens'.² Dickens was one of the first writers to pay close attention to child characters in his work and *David Copperfield* contains some of the finest chapters ever written on childhood in English fiction. Dickens focuses with acute observation and empathy – and from a child's perspective – on both the comic and painful elements in David's first decade of life. David's childish understanding gives rise to the comedy of his interchanges with Mr Barkis, the

1 Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction*, Peter Nevill, London 1952, p. 13

2 Forster, Vol. 1, p. 4

Yarmouth waiter and the Micawbers, while his powerlessness as a child is revealed in his brutal treatment by the Murdstones and Creakle and in his hardships after his mother's death. As David becomes an adult, his status as hero of the novel becomes less clear in that at times his own character is eclipsed by the sheer energy and vibrancy with which other characters are revealed to the reader.

It is in his characterisation and style that Dickens performs his most distinctive authorial magic and *David Copperfield* contains some of the most famous fictional creations in his panoply. Chief among these in the category of possible heroes is the impecunious but convivial Mr Micawber with his comically dramatic extremes of optimism and despair. Like David and Dickens, he delights in the power of language, writing in his own elaborate 'sort of legal phraseology' that he is 'Crushed' a mere hour and a half before he enjoys a warm and jovial dinner during which he makes no mention of any catastrophe having occurred to him (p. 346). If the novel lacks the broader comedy of Dickens's earlier works like *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) or *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1), it does render human foibles with much affectionate humour: Betsey Trotwood's aversion to donkeys on her land, Mr Dick's memorial-writing and kite-flying, Mrs Micawber's adamant and repeated vow: 'I never will desert Mr Micawber' (p. 213).

Among those characters who have no claim to 'hero-hood' within the novel Uriah Heep is prime villain. With his obsequious "umbleness" and serpentine writhing, with his lashless, virtually lidless eyes like 'red suns' and his clammy, skeletal hands he is a reptilian being to whom David is 'attracted . . . in very repulsion' (p. 310). There are undoubted sexual connotations to Heep's serpent-like body and David's aversion to him intensifies exponentially when Heep fawningly insinuates to David that he is not only out to gain control over Wickfield's business but aims to marry Agnes. The thought of a sexual union between Uriah and Agnes fills David with a horror so strong that he feels like running Heep through the body with a red-hot poker (p. 308). The distaste for Heep that we as readers share with David is created of course by Dickens's vivid and vibrant style. Images, such as those of Jane Murdstone with her steel-fetter accessories who "look[s] at [David] out of the pickle-jar with as great an access of sourness as if her black eyes had absorbed its contents" (p. 113), or Mr Mell's blowing his flute as if "he would gradually blow his whole being into the large hole at the top, and ooze away at the keys" (p. 67), are also examples of the 'special effects' Dickens uses to engage the reader in his novelistic illusion.

When he began writing *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens (1812-70), at thirty-seven, was already famous for his conjuring with words and was himself a 'hero' to many of his readers. Initially published serially, *David Copperfield* appeared in twenty (sold as nineteen) monthly parts from

May 1849 to November 1850.³ His eighth of fourteen and a half novels, *David Copperfield* sits securely in the middle of Dickens's writing career and in the middle of the nineteenth century. The values it expresses, on its surface at least, are very much mid-Victorian, middle-class values: moral earnestness, industriousness, separate spheres for men and women, and in a broad sense 'knowing one's place'. A long novel with a happy ending, full of coincidences, concerned with personal growth and marriage, in its form and content it epitomises what we have tended to regard as the Victorian novel.

David Copperfield is generally held to be Dickens's most personal and autobiographical novel. It was also, famously, Dickens's favourite. In his 'Preface' to the Charles Dickens Edition of the novel (1867) (reprinted in this Wordsworth edition) he writes: '[o]f all my books, I like this the best . . . like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is David Copperfield' (p. 3). Mr Micawber claims 'that in our children we liv[e] again,' (p. 340) and Dickens's 'favourite child', a fictional autobiography, is sometimes read as being an autobiography of Dickens himself 'living again'. He certainly based Mr Micawber on his father and elements of Dora on his first love, Maria Beadnell. Agnes was probably inspired by one or both of his beloved sisters-in-law, Mary Hogarth (who had died at seventeen) and Georgina Hogarth (who lived with Dickens for most of her adult life, even after Dickens's separation from her sister, Catherine, in 1858). The young David reads novels Dickens read in childhood and like Dickens becomes a parliamentary shorthand reporter for a newspaper then a successful writer. Although Dickens expressed surprise when Forster pointed out to him that David Copperfield's initials 'were but his own reversed',⁴ he seems to have been clearly aware of the very personal nature of certain sections of the novel.

Forster revealed in his 1872-4 biography of Dickens that in 1847, before he conceived his initial idea for *David Copperfield*, Dickens wrote a fragment of autobiography recounting his painful memories of the then secret but now well-known dark period of his childhood when his family were living in debtors' prison and when Dickens at the age of about ten (possibly twelve) lived alone in lodgings, and was forced to give up his education and work in a blacking factory. David's experience in the novel is at times taken almost verbatim from Dickens's autobiographical fragment. Dickens, for example, writes:

3 Serial publication in itself provided transformational possibilities to the author. It enabled Dickens, for example, to alter Miss Mowcher's character from that of an unsavoury procuress to that of a sympathetic, even heroic woman after a real-life original upon whom he had rather too closely based her wrote to him complaining at his scandalous treatment of her within the novel. See *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 5, pp. 674-7.

4 Forster, Vol. 2, p. 78

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these everyday associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my breast . . .⁵

while David recounts:

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these henceforth everyday associates with those of my happier childhood – not to say with Steerforth, Traddles, and the rest of those boys; and felt my hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my bosom. [p. 128].

Even in these most personal sections about childhood, however, David Copperfield should not be confused with Charles Dickens; Dickens has used elements of his own life but has transformed them. He makes David an orphan without siblings who has already suffered much in his young life. The physical illnesses he suffered as a child are replaced by David's emotional batterings under the Murdstone regime, and he invents a saviour in the form of his Aunt Betsey and creates a dramatic journey to her door. The novel is not, nor does it claim to be, Dickens's autobiography. It is a novel that is, nevertheless, in other ways personal in its focus. It contains far less of the social protest or sweeping panoramas of society that are central in some of Dickens's other novels, such as *Bleak House* (1852–3) or *Hard Times* (1854). Satirical comment is made on the practices that lie behind the dreamy façade of Doctors' Commons, and Dickens attacks the new experimental system of solitary confinement in prisons. Most of the novel, however, focuses on the personal side of life: on human relationships and individual development, and on the intangible elements in our lives – our hopes, dreams and illusions.

This concentration is just as true of David's focus as narrator as it is of Dickens's focus as writer. We are aware that in his adulthood David beavers away to establish his financial position, that he begins training as a proctor, becomes a shorthand reporter and then a writer, but the novel's interest is in the private elements of his life. 'It is not my purpose, in this record,' he writes, 'though in all other essentials it is my written memory, to pursue the history of my own fictions. They express themselves, and I leave them to themselves' (pp. 555). 'I do not enter on the aspirations, the delights, anxieties, and triumphs of my art. That I truly devoted myself to it with my strongest earnestness, and bestowed upon it every energy of my soul, I have already said' (p. 680). Some of the

⁵ quoted in Forster, Vol. 1, p. 22

delights and energy of David's art we are of course made implicitly aware of through his style in writing the story of his own life.

The full title of the novel in its serial publication: *The Personal History, Adventures, Experience, & Observation of David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery. (Which He never meant to be Published on any Account)*, shortened to *The Personal History of David Copperfield* on first-volume publication, places the focus firmly on 'Personal Life', as does the narrative method. This was the first novel in which Dickens used a first-person narrator, something he did again only twice as a novelist: in his succeeding novel *Bleak House*, which uses both a first-person narrator and an omniscient narrator, and in *Great Expectations* (1860-1). Like *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield* is a *Bildungsroman*; David relates his life to us in his own words, from childhood, through the errors of judgement and seeking of identity in youth, to an established and mature adulthood. The first-person narrative method allows us to see only what David chooses to tell us, and we are shown events and characters from his perspective. On one level this enables us to develop an intimate understanding of David's own thought and experience. On another level, however, this method of narration opens up the possibility of alternative interpretations and leaves gaps in the text; it provokes us to ask how far we can rely on David's account. Is Agnes as radiantly angelic and self-sacrificing as David would have us believe? Is Dora so childish? How can his account of the hours before his birth be authentic? Questions like these highlight the transformational possibilities of autobiography. David, at the time he narrates his story, is a celebrated author who has been happily married for over ten years. He already knows the outcome of his story when he puts pen to paper to tell it. As narrator he is creating an interpretation of his past life as he sees it from the particular time at which he writes. In recreating his life as a personal history he must delve into the past and rely on memory, a fluid and unstable medium, which he transforms into a structured, linear narrative.

Just as David's vision of his life might change depending on the stage of life from which he chooses to consider it, so too can a reader's perception of the text alter depending on the stage of life at which he or she reads the novel. Like that other famous Victorian *Bildungsroman* published two years prior to *David Copperfield*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), when a reader reads it makes a difference. Read when young, for example, the childhood sections or comic moments may seem to dominate; read a little later in life the focus may appear to be on David's earnest quest after his dreams or on the romance and marriage elements in the novel; a yet later reading might see the novel's elegiac qualities as central. Both *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield* as narrators write about their pasts, about what they have gained by their current successes, but also implicitly they are writing from a point of stasis about

what they have lost or never had. Shortly after his first marriage David writes:

I search my breast, and commit its secrets, if I know them, without any reservation to this paper. The old unhappy loss or want of something had, I am conscious, some place in my heart. . . . When I . . . thought of the summer days when all the air had been filled with my boyish enchantment, I did miss something of the realisation of my dreams. [p. 521].

His 'unhappy loss or want of something' refers to his having chosen Dora, or rather his illusion of Dora, for his wife when he might have chosen a true partner in life like Agnes. Yet David grieves not only over actual losses he experiences; the father he never knew, his mother's death, the death of Dora, the death of his idolised friend Steerforth, but also inherently over all the past selves he has been and all the dreams in his life that will remain unfulfilled or that have been revealed as illusions. The novel is in this way nostalgic in the most positive sense of that word; growth means loss as well as change.

David converts his life into the story or illusion he creates of it, but at the same time, the story he creates is *about* transformation and illusion. Beginning as a 'fatherless little stranger' yet to be met (p. 7), he is soon a newborn baby, christened David Copperfield the younger after his dead father. He develops through childhood from beloved son in a quiet home with his mother and Peggotty, through brutally treated stepson denied access to his mother, to neglected orphan unloved on the face of the planet. As he matures he observes shifts in human relationships and see changes in other characters; he realises Murdstone's power over his mother: 'I knew as well that he could mould her pliant nature into any form he chose, as I know, now, that he did it' (p. 39). David, however, is resistant to the Murdstones' attempts to mould him. One form of his resistance comes from his own imaginative re-visionings of himself into the heroes of the eighteenth-century novels he reads. His period at Creakle's school confirms his awareness of the brutality of those who wield unearned power, but his hero-worship of the glamorous Steerforth, the only boy not threatened with Creakle's violence, is worship of an illusion.

David's period at Murdstone and Grinby's alters his social position dramatically downwards, but through force of will he takes the risk of escaping to Dover to find his aunt who, like a fairy godmother, enables him to remake himself again; he becomes a respected pupil at Dr Strong's school: 'Thus I began my new life, in a new name, and with everything new about me' (p. 176). Later, as head boy, he looks back on himself when he first arrived. 'That little fellow seems to be no part of me; I remember him as something left behind upon the road of life - as

something I have passed, rather than have actually been – and almost think of him as of someone else' (p. 219).

After leaving school he is an eager young man looking forward to becoming, by dint of effort, a successful gentleman. The first time he enters Doctors' Commons, 'the noise of the city seem[s] to melt, as if by magic, into a softened distance' (p. 283) and he is '[v]ery well satisfied with the dreamy nature of this retreat' (p. 285). Doctors' Commons is another false vision; time reveals to him the lack of control Spewlow has over his affairs and the double-dealing that lies behind much of the work done in his chosen profession. David's self-training to become a shorthand reporter, followed by the advance of his literary career, demonstrates his transformation from young, dreamy romantic to earnest mid-Victorian gentleman.

The stripping away of other central illusions in the novel also marks this change. David's faith in Steerforth is painfully lost when he betrays David's trust and runs off with Emily. Steerforth, with his easy grace and charm, is aware of his own illusionist ability to appear to other people in any way he chooses: "I'll produce myself in any state you please, sentimental or comical," he tells David (p. 245). His power metafictionally mirrors Dickens's own as creator of characters, but with ultimately negative rather than positive effect. David's relationship with Steerforth is one of the most complex in the novel and it might be argued that Steerforth is the central love of his life. After Steerforth's death David gradually realises that Traddles is the truer friend, the friend more worthy of the appellation 'hero'. Yet although he realises that he has misread Steerforth's character, and despite seeing Steerforth's careless falsity and the pain and damage it has inflicted on so many people, David cannot completely leave behind his adoration of his former idol. It is as if giving up his image of Steerforth at his best would mean denying too much of his own earlier self.

David's hopes about what marriage to Dora will be like are similarly lost when he realises that she cannot be altered by him: 'it began to occur to me that perhaps Dora's mind was already formed' (p. 559). Long after Dora's death he realises that Agnes would make the better wife. Twentieth-century readers often find the three possible female romantic partners for David – Agnes, Dora and Little Em'ly – problematic in that they fall so clearly into the unflinching categories of 'Angel in the House', 'child-wife' and 'fallen woman' respectively. These female characters have much less scope for evolution than the male characters in the novel. The only acceptable change is the slight one that Agnes undergoes from loving and dutiful daughter to loving and dutiful wife. Dora's inability to become a 'suitable' wife results in her death (as it did for David's mother, Clara), while Emily's desire to become a 'lady' ends in her ruination and a shame so strong that it must be taken out of England. Betsey Trotwood offers

some positive scope for female growth, but only at the cost of personal suffering. Indomitably independent, she lives separated from her husband and uses her maiden name, but her experience of marriage has altered her opinion of men so much that she turns her back on her newborn great nephew because he is a boy. Although she cannot change him into a girl, she does transform him into 'Trotwood Copperfield' and in turn is herself altered by her relationship with him.

A key element in David's overall development comes in his reclamation through authorship of his birth name, David Copperfield, a name he is rarely called by in the novel. His mother calls him Davy, Murdstone refers to him as Brooks of Sheffield, the Peggotty family call him Mas'r Davy, and his dinner in Yarmouth *en route* to London is paid for in the name of Master Murdstone. He is Master Copperfield at Murdstone and Grinby's, Micawber calls him Copperfield, he addresses his box for Dover to Master David, and Steerforth calls him Daisy. To Uriah Heep he becomes "Master Copperfield - I should say, Mister Copperfield" (p. 305), while Mrs Crupp calls him Mr Copperfull and Dora calls him Doady. This plethora of changing and pet names registers different aspects of his character and the fluidity of his personal and social relationships; at the same time it obscures the self-identity that he seeks as he matures. He can only entrench his identity for himself and reveal to readers what he has become by writing his history as that of David Copperfield.

Harry Stone has examined the fairy-tale motifs in Dickens's writings and calls *David Copperfield* 'the exemplar of Dickens' mastery of his fairy-tale art'.⁶ Fairy tales are of course concerned with magic, illusion and transformation. The magic of imagination and memory drives David's narrative just as it drives him to find his aunt: 'But for the quiet picture I had conjured up, of my mother in her youth and beauty, weeping by the fire, and my aunt relenting to her, I hardly think I should have had courage to go on until next day' (p. 150). The magic of human relationships, however, also lies at the heart of this novel. David's lack of a nuclear family for much of his life results in his establishing 'family-like' personal relationships. This is a novel notable for the number of melded families, orphans and surrogate parents, children and siblings it contains. It is a novel about finding one's place not only in society but more importantly in private life.

David's full maturation is signalled by his ability to distinguish between illusion and 'real magic'. He realises that Littimer's respectability and Heep's 'umbleness are masks and that his views of Steerforth and Dora were based on his own dreams. He has observed other characters

transform themselves: Mrs Gummidge's rapid change at a time of crisis, the amelioration of his aunt's views on men and marriage, the fulfilment in Australia of Mr Micawber's belief that something will turn up, thus forestalling his possible future as "a mountebank about the country swallowing a sword-blade, and eating the devouring element" (p. 572).

David's truest relationships are with those characters who can see through and strip away illusions and who are not afraid to do so: characters like Micawber who is instrumental in the downfall of Uriah Heep, Traddles who courageously condemns Steerforth's poor treatment of Mr Mell, and Mr Dick who is not afraid to speak out and save the Strong's marriage or speak up on David's behalf. His closest relationships are also with those who can help him in his own transformation and who warn him against false visions: characters like Peggotty who is loyal to him from his birth, Betsey Trotwood who takes him in, educates him, and warns him without interference about his choice of wife, and Agnes who constantly loves him, advises him, and warns him about his 'bad Angel', Steerforth (p. 296). Any of these characters might be the hero of his life just as David might be himself having gained their love and affection.

In concluding, he writes: 'I see myself, with Agnes at my side, journeying along the road of life. I see our children and our friends around us; and I hear the roar of many voices, not indifferent to me as I travel on' (p. 703). He has learned to perform magic in two ways: through the imaginative creations of his fictions, and, more importantly, in his personal life. "If I had had a conjurer's cap, there is no one I should have wished for but you," he has once said to Agnes (p. 411). By the time his story ends he realises that he does wear a conjurer's cap, and he can through his own magic draw to him those people whom he can truly trust and love. *David Copperfield* is the story of David's making his way in the world and his maturation from child to man, but more significantly, it is about his making his way in human relationships where, as his 'personal history' shows, the true magic of life lies.

ADRIENNE E. GAVIN
*Canterbury Christ Church
University College*

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